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Essay by John J. Miller

MASTER OF MODERN HORROR



“ALL EARTH-LIFE,” ANNOUNCES ONE OF H.P. Lovecraft’s doomed characters at a moment of terrible revelation, is a “jest or mistake.” Lovecraft may have felt the same way about his own existence. When he died in near poverty at the age of 46 in 1937, he considered himself a failure. Only a few people knew his byline, and almost all of them knew it from trashy pulp magazines. A three-sentence obituary from the Associated Press neglected to mention even a single short-story title.

Today, Lovecraft is commonly regarded as the greatest American horror writer of the 20th century, and his only real rival in any century is Edgar Allan Poe. (The jury is out on Stephen King.) His most famous invention was a kraken-like sea beast with an unpronounceable name: Cthulhu. The stories loosely connected to this tentacled leviathan—there are about a dozen—are collectively called the Cthulhu Mythos. Their namesake has attained iconic status not only within the narrow confines of the horror genre, but without it as well. Cthulhu has become everything from the subject of songs by the heavy-metal band Metallica to

a green plush doll that sits on bookshelves. Every four years brings on a new array of t-shirts and bumper stickers that tell the same joke: “Cthulhu for President: Why choose the lesser evil?”

Lovecraft has done more than penetrate pop culture. His influence shows up in the work of Jorge Luis Borges, Umberto Eco, and Thomas Pynchon. Joyce Carol Oates has written about him in the *New York Review of Books* and edited an anthology of his fiction. Lovecraft wrote to entertain, but he also wrote with intellectual purpose. He sought to put forth a philosophy he called “cosmic indifferentism”—an atheistic, amoral materialism that insisted on human irrelevance—along with the related idea that most people can’t handle this hard truth. Fritz Leiber, a noted fantasy author, described Lovecraft as “the Copernicus of the horror story.” Just as Copernicus showed that humanity does not sit at the center of everything, Lovecraft shifted the emphasis of the horror story away from the psychologies and fates of individual characters and toward what he called “the horrors that lurk ceaselessly behind life in time and in space.”

Lovecraft expressed his views at many times and in many ways, but perhaps never better than in the opening paragraph of “The Call of Cthulhu”:

The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far. The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age.

The first sentence of the paragraph constitutes Lovecraft’s single entry in *Bartlett’s Familiar Quotations*. If he wrote a second-most-famous line, it’s probably from the beginning of his perceptive study, *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, and it provides a good glimpse of his lit-



erary method: “The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown.”

The Horror, the Horror

LOVECRAFT’S JOURNEY FROM OBSCURITY to renown took decades. Over the past 30 years or so, a variety of publishers have put out their own editions of Lovecraft’s work, which is largely in the public domain. His breakthrough moment—if we must isolate only one—came in 2005, when the Library of America published what remains the best single-volume edition of his work, using the definitive texts of S.T. Joshi, his foremost scholar and booster. By wrapping the book in its distinctive black jacket with a thin red-white-and-blue stripe, the eminent imprint signaled that Lovecraft at last belonged in the American canon—not necessarily the equal of Hawthorne, Melville, Twain, and company, but certainly worthy of special regard. Stories that used to show up only in cheap paperbacks with gross-out covers now find themselves appearing in more respectable packages. The latest two entrants come from top academic and commercial publishers. *The Classic Horror Stories*, from Oxford University Press, is edited by Roger Luckhurst, a professor of literature at Birkbeck College in London. The collection includes a well-chosen group of Cthulhu Mythos stories but uses texts uncorrected by Joshi, for the purpose of retaining, as Luckhurst puts it, “some of the pulp energy” of their original appearance. *The Thing on the Doorstep and Other Weird Stories*, edited by Joshi and reissued by Penguin, avoids this pitfall but leaves out some of Lovecraft’s best writing. It also features a new introduction by Guillermo del Toro, a film director (*Pacific Rim*, *Pan’s Labyrinth*) who has said that one of his professional ambitions is to make a movie of *At the Mountains of Madness*, Lovecraft’s novella set in the wilds of Antarctica.

Before this small explosion of interest, the biggest barrier to Lovecraft’s mainstream acceptance had been his status as a writer of horror fiction—a field of literature that suffers from the suspicion that its readers take a perverse delight in graphic descriptions of torture and murder. This is an unfortunate misunderstanding, brought on in part by the sad fact that some horror books and movies really are no better than this. In its practical application, however, the classification *horror* encompasses a wide range of creative expression, from lowbrow penny dreadfuls and shilling shockers to Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw*. Much of the confusion is semantic. Strictly defined, *horror* is a blend of fear and disgust, the revulsion we feel in the face

of cruelty and decay. Although Lovecraft certainly exploited this emotion—read the final paragraph of “The Rats in the Walls,” for instance—most of the time he aimed higher. The finest horror fiction is really about *terror*, which combines fear and awe in a powerful sensation that haunts rather than startles. Lovecraft sometimes used the term *supernatural horror*, but as a thoroughgoing materialist, he didn’t really believe in the supernatural. If a phenomenon appeared to violate the laws of nature, he argued, it was only because we didn’t understand the science of the laws. Much of Lovecraft’s work originally ran in a pulp magazine called *Weird Tales*, with *weird* meaning eerie or uncanny. Yet that promising word never really caught on as a label. So we’re stuck with calling it all horror, and cramming slasher flicks like *Friday the 13th* and its inter-

satirized them in *Northanger Abbey*), followed by the Romantics, who gave birth to the first stories of vampirism as well as to *Frankenstein*. And so on, down through Poe and Ambrose Bierce and all the way to Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*. Even non-fiction authors find horror useful: Daniel W. Drezner has written *Theories of International Politics and Zombies*, published by Princeton University Press. His approach may be tongue-in-cheek, but his purpose is serious—just like the best horror literature.

The Outsider

HOWARD PHILLIPS LOVECRAFT WAS born in 1890 to a genteel family in Providence, Rhode Island. Raised in the shadow of Brown University, he never attended it, in large part due to a sickly childhood. As he grew up, Lovecraft became engaged in the world of amateur journalism, which foreshadowed the blogging boom of the 21st century: hobbyists printed specialty publications and distributed them to a small readership. In 1915, Lovecraft printed the first edition of his own newsletter, a casual imitation of Joseph Addison and Richard Steele’s *Tatler* and *Spectator* periodicals, which, though from the 18th century, were still widely respected as models of composition. Lovecraft called his journal *The Conservative*. Over the next eight years, he put out a total of 13 issues, writing or editing all the contents. The entire run is now collected in a slim volume by the British publisher Arktos—an unnecessary venture but for the growing interest in every aspect of Lovecraft’s life.

The Conservative was not conservative in the modern sense. A kind of reactionary Anglophilia spurred Lovecraft to reject the American Revolution. Throughout his life, he displayed his anachronistic loyalty through his British spelling, rendering *color* as *colour* and *odor* as *odour*. Although he despised Woodrow Wilson—mostly for refusing to jump into the First World War and defend Mother England—he also distrusted capitalism, especially for its corrosions of culture. Progressive ideas seeped into his thought: “The masses of mankind must remain subject to the will of a dominant aristocracy so long as the present structure of the human brain endures,” he wrote. By “aristocracy,” Lovecraft didn’t mean a ruling class of noble bloodlines but an elite selected for their intelligence and expertise.

Joshi has argued that Lovecraft’s politics evolved over time, as he went from hating Wilson to cheering on Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the New Deal, but Lovecraft’s views may demonstrate a rough consistency. In “The Shadow Out of Time,” finished in

Books mentioned in this essay:

H.P. Lovecraft: Tales, edited by Peter Straub. Library of America, 850 pages, \$35

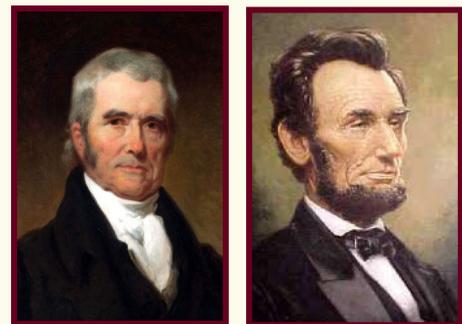
The Classic Horror Stories, by H.P. Lovecraft, edited by Roger Luckhurst. Oxford University Press, 496 pages, \$24.95

The Thing on the Doorstep and Other Weird Stories, by H.P. Lovecraft, edited by S.T. Joshi. Penguin Classics, 544 pages, \$25

The Conservative: The Complete Issues, 1915–1923, by H.P. Lovecraft. Arktos, 218 pages, \$29

minable sequels into the same broad category as the most refined ghost stories, such as Vladimir Nabokov’s “The Vane Sisters” and Shirley Jackson’s *The Haunting of Hill House*.

Horror, in any case, is more than a genre: it’s a technique that great writers have used from the earliest times. Homer is full of horror, from the sea monsters Scylla and Charybdis to the gruesome scene in which Odysseus drives a spear into the eye of the Cyclops. In *Beowulf*, the hero rips the arm of Grendel from its socket. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* features a decapitation. Dante’s *Inferno* portrays an entire geography of horror. Shakespeare inserted horror into his plays, from the soothsayer in *Julius Caesar* to the ghost in *Hamlet* to the witches in *Macbeth*. Next came the Graveyard Poets and then the Gothic novelists (plus Jane Austen, who



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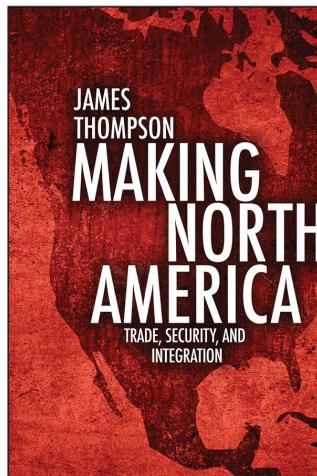
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1935, Lovecraft described an alien civilization as a kind of Progressive utopia: “The political and economic system of each unit was a sort of fascistic socialism, with major resources rationally distributed, and power delegated to a small governing board elected by the votes of all able to pass certain educational and psychological tests.” On the pages of his newsletter, he also trafficked in the vilest strains of Progressive-era race theory, praising “that magnificent Teutonic stock” as “the only true Aryan” and speaking of “actual biological supremacy.” He denounced immigration, scoffed at melting-pot Americanism, and talked up black inferiority. This is ugly stuff and it makes for disagreeable reading. Later editions of *The Conservative* focused more on literature than politics, and the ideas that would animate Lovecraft’s best fiction began to find a mature voice. In the 1918 issue, for example, he took up the theme of “man’s utter insignificance.” He continued, in words echoing Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.: “All that we know, see, dream, or imagine, is less than a grain of dust in infinity. It is virtually nothing, or at best no more than a mathematical point.”

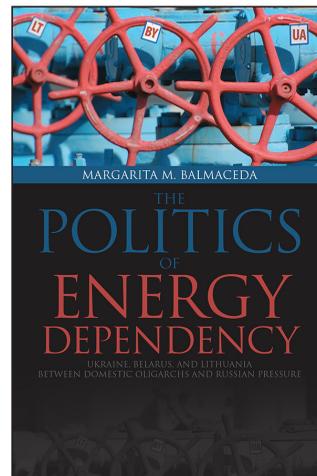
Around this time, Lovecraft began to write horror stories. Most of these early efforts are forgettable, the products of a young author gaining experience, but a few stand out. In “The Statement of Randolph Carter” (1919), a scientist descends into a tomb and disappears—but not before sending a message that urges others not to follow, in a conclusion that suggests a doom worse than death. In “The Music of Erich Zann” (1921), a mute violist plays bewildering harmonies that seem directed at an unknown force from beyond the window of a top-floor apartment. Lovecraft’s most successful tale from this initial period is “The Outsider” (1921), a story of resurrection and revelation that has started to land on high-school reading lists. The unnamed narrator emerges from a mausoleum, travels paths he dimly recalls, and finally reaches a castle as it hosts a masquerade. He plunges in, “stepping as I did so from my single bright moment of hope to my blackest convulsion of despair and realisation.” The partygoers flee in panic, confusing the narrator, who discovers the truth only when he looks in a mirror and sees his reflection for the first time: “It was a compound of all that is unclean, uncanny, unwelcome, abnormal, and detestable...the awful baring of that which the merciful earth should always hide.” He retreats to his burrow and, in a line that’s tempting to interpret as autobiographical, concludes: “I am an outsider; a stranger in this century and among those who are still men.”

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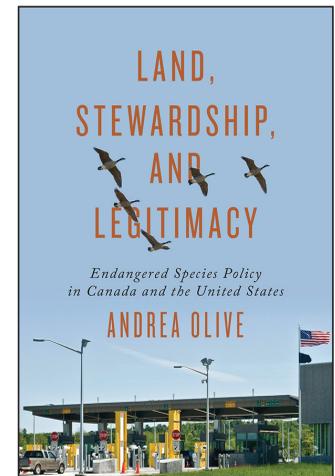
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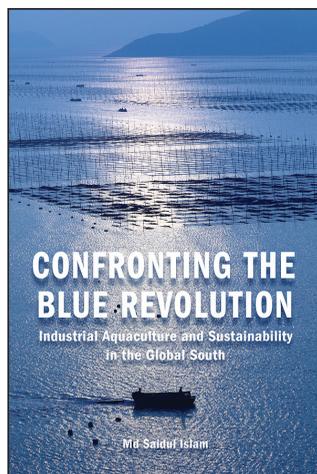
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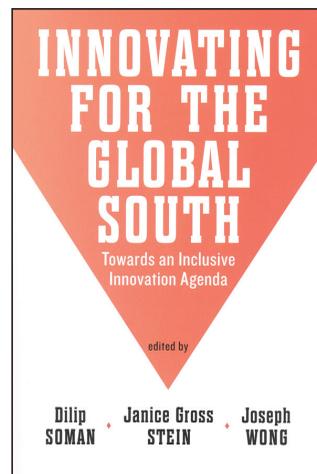
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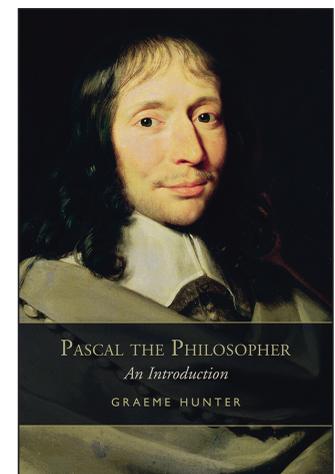
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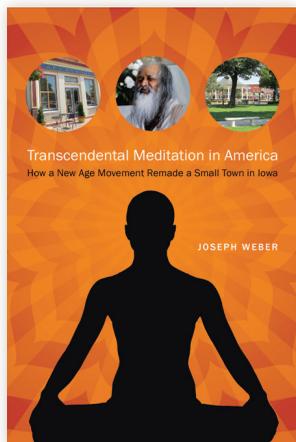
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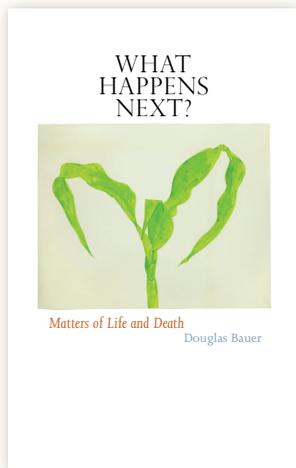


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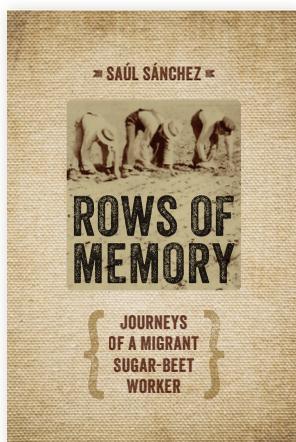
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The Call of Cthulhu

LOVECRAFT WAS IN FACT LESS OF A LONER than these words suggest. He was always forming friendships and writing letters—nobody knows how many, though about 5,000 appear to have survived. In 1924, he married Sonia Greene, a hat maker who participated in amateur journalism. She was a Jewish immigrant from Russia, a fact that Lovecraft's apologists always point out when trying to mitigate the author's racism. The marriage struggled from the start, with Lovecraft leaving his beloved Providence for his wife's home in New York City, which he approached with wonder but came to loathe. He continued to write under his own name as well as for others. One client was Harry Houdini, the magician and stunt artist, who had been hired by *Weird Tales* to produce stories that would turn his celebrity into sales. (The result of this collaboration, the Egyptian-themed "Under the Pyramids," appears in the Penguin volume.) Meanwhile, Sonia traveled extensively, even taking a job

Lovecraft populated his yarns with a riotous bestiary of monsters, aliens, cannibals, and voodoo sects.

in Cleveland, so she and Lovecraft were often separated. The marriage teetered for about two years and collapsed completely when Lovecraft returned to Providence in 1926. The move marked the beginning of what would become the busiest and most creative phase of Lovecraft's life. Fueled by his disorienting experience in New York City as well as his discovery of writers such as Algernon Blackwood and Arthur Machen, Lovecraft shifted away from stories that commonly read like imitations of Poe and into something wholly new and different.

The first product of this new phase was "The Call of Cthulhu," which is hard to describe without sounding silly: it's a horror story about a squid-faced monster the size of a mountain. But it's the best thing Lovecraft ever wrote, a masterpiece of careful plotting and mounting dread. It involves an artist disturbed by bizarre dreams, a strange sculpture, and a globetrotting investigation that culminates in the South Pacific. A city of impossible geometry, reminiscent of an M.C. Escher print, rises from the waves—and then so does

Cthulhu, who has waited in a state of entrapment until "the stars were right." Even before the story begins, we know that the narrator is dead, for the tale presents itself as a document found among the papers of a deceased Bostonian. "I know too much," he confesses at the end, and we understand that he did not die peacefully in his sleep.

One of the story's first readers, Farnsworth Wright, apparently didn't know enough: he turned down "The Call of Cthulhu" for *Weird Tales*, which he edited. Lovecraft could be meek in the face of rejection, and he might have responded by burying "The Call of Cthulhu" in his files. Instead, he mustered the confidence to demand a reconsideration. The letter he attached to the resubmitted story is one of the clearest statements of his literary goals: "Now all my tales are based on the fundamental premise that common human laws and interests and emotions have no validity or significance in the vast cosmos-at-large." After a second look, Wright accepted "The Call of Cthulhu," reversing one of the worst decisions any editor of horror fiction ever made.

Lovecraft went on to write a string of his most popular stories. "The Colour Out of Space," regarded by many as his single best tale, concerns a glowing meteorite of uncertain origin that transforms a backwoods farm into a "blasted heath" of rot and death. In a framing narrative, a surveyor hears an account of what happened as he maps the area for a reservoir—it's like *Deliverance* except that it swaps the banjo music for an extraterrestrial menace. "The Dunwich Horror" involves black-magic conjuring, a grotesque chimera, and, unusual for Lovecraft, an optimistic ending. "The Whisperer in Darkness," set largely in the hills of Vermont, recounts rustic legends that mask sinister realities.

In the typical Lovecraft story, the protagonist—"hero" is not really the right word—is a bachelor of scholarly or antiquarian bent who investigates some mystery of art, science, or folklore and uncovers hidden truths that would have been better left alone. He populated his yarns with a riotous bestiary of monsters, aliens, cannibals, voodoo sects, and even "the blind idiot god Azathoth, Lord of All Things, encircled by his flopping horde of mindless and amorphous dancers." One of his best-known props was a book of forbidden knowledge called the *Necronomicon*, supposedly written in the 8th century by "the mad Arab Abdul Alhazred" and later translated by John Dee, the Elizabethan occultist. As with so much of Lovecraft and his potted histories, the *Necronomicon* blends fiction and fact: Alhazred sprang from Lovecraft's imagination and Dee was an actual person. Lovecraft played these tricks constantly. Just as he



began to write “The Whisperer in Darkness,” for instance, the astronomer Clyde Tombaugh spotted Pluto at the edge of the solar system—and so Lovecraft pulled the dwarf planet into his tale. He set many of his stories in a fictionalized New England, most notably in a Massachusetts town called Arkham, the home of Miskatonic University. William Faulkner took a similar approach with his own made-up Yoknapatawpha County, where, as he once put it: “The past is never dead. It’s not even past.” Something akin might be said of Lovecraft’s menacing world: The dead never passed. They’re not even dead.

Be Afraid...

LOVECRAFT WAS NOT A SYSTEMATIC world-builder like J.R.R. Tolkien. By drawing from real and imagined mythologies as well as cross-referencing his own stories and alluding to the stories of writers he admired, however, he could attain an unmatched sense of dread and awe. Sinister forces and wicked rituals loomed in the background of everything, seeming both familiar and incomprehensible. The fact that the name Cthulhu can’t be pronounced is a kind of metaphor: “To name is to reveal,” wrote Algernon Blackwood in “The Willows,” which Lovecraft hailed as

the best story of weird fiction ever written. In Lovecraft’s universe, revelation rarely ends well. Characters who act on their curiosity and try to make sense of their surroundings find their sanity tested as they confront colors never seen before, angles that look acute but behave obtuse, and the relentless threat of violent death. The unluckiest even tempt the fate of their species: “It is absolutely necessary, for the peace and safety of mankind, that some of earth’s dark, dead corners and unplumbed depths be let alone; lest sleeping abnormalities wake to resurgent life, and blasphemously surviving nightmares squirm and splash out of their black lairs to newer and wider conquests.”

At a time when Ernest Hemingway was trying to pare down the language to simple words and sentences, Lovecraft took off in the opposite direction. He never met an adjective or adverb he wasn’t willing to unleash, particularly if it sounded spooky. “Accursed,” “eldritch,” and “fungoid” were favorites. This met with sharp criticism. “Surely one of the primary rules for writing an effective tale of horror is never to use any of these words—especially if you are going, at the end, to produce an invisible whistling octopus,” wrote the critic Edmund Wilson in 1945. “The only real horror in most of these fictions is the horror of bad taste and bad art.” Perhaps the taste for Lovecraft’s prose must be

acquired through sheer determination. Once immersed in his words, however, readers may find that his lines flow and achieve a surprising richness. It’s a simple fact that legions of readers already have discovered. “Lovecraft was not a good writer,” claimed Wilson, an excellent stylist who is not nearly as well read today as the target of his attack.

Lovecraft’s characters are singularly unmemorable, and Lovecraft knew it: “Individuals and their fortunes within natural law move me very little,” he once confessed. “They are all momentary trifles bound from a common nothingness toward another common nothingness.” Yet he did ponder the fates of civilizations. Several of his later works carry elaborate accounts of the rise and fall of alien societies. Human life never measures up to the otherworldly ideals: in one story, Lovecraft proposes that humanity’s immediate successors will be an intelligent “coleopterous species”—i.e., beetles. It recalls the anecdote, usually attributed to the biologist J.B.S. Haldane, about theologians who wonder what we might learn about the Creator by studying creation. Haldane’s answer: he has an inordinate fondness of beetles.

What explains an inordinate fondness for Lovecraft? Perhaps a more fundamental question must come first: why do so many of us en-

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joy horror? “I wants to make your flesh creep,” says a boy in *The Pickwick Papers*, and lots of readers and moviegoers enjoy submitting to a case of the goosebumps. Perhaps the appeal is no more complicated than what Edith Wharton, who wrote a fair number of ghost stories, once called “the fun of the shudder.” Some physiologists, in fact, point to the pleasant rush that comes from the fear-induced release of adrenaline, dopamine, and endorphins in a safe environment. There may be social aspects as well. A 1986 study revealed that men enjoy scary movies more when they’re with women who feel distressed, and women enjoy them more when they’re with men who display confidence. So if nothing else, they’re good for dates.

The Unknown Unknown

IN HIS INTRODUCTION TO THE OXFORD book, Luckhurst tries to summarize the fascination with Lovecraft: “For many readers, one of the key pleasures of Lovecraft’s work is the way the fiction becomes a vehicle for the dramatization of a rigorous philosophy.” That’s true enough—it describes the main current of Joshi’s influential scholarship, for instance—but also too antiseptic. It doesn’t really explain why we like it when Cthulhu makes our flesh creep. Del Toro, however, may be on to something in his Introduction,

whose opening lines point to human nature: “To learn what we fear is to learn who we are.” He proceeds to argue that “within the genre lies one of the last refuges of spirituality” in a material world. Much of the best horror literature, in fact, displays an inescapable spiritual dimension: Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “Christabel” and “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “Young Goodman Brown,” the ghostly tales of Russell Kirk, and so on. William Peter Blatty’s *The Exorcist*, despite its movie-derived reputation for head-spinning tricks and projectile vomiting, is a product of devout Catholicism. It turns out that even horror moves in mysterious ways.

For all of his indispensable contributions to Lovecraft scholarship, Joshi is almost completely tone deaf on this point. He tends to rate Lovecraft’s stories by how well they adhere to the philosophy of cosmic indifferentism, calling out every apparent false note. At one point in “The Call of Cthulhu,” for example, the narrator announces that the story’s revelations have forced him to question his devotion to “absolute materialism,” in a concession that Joshi has labeled “a little bothersome.” Whenever a Lovecraft story gives off the faintest whiff of conventional morality—a sorceress alarmed by a crucifix, a character who criticizes the activities of “very wicked people and very wicked cults,” and so on—Joshi pounces with a duti-

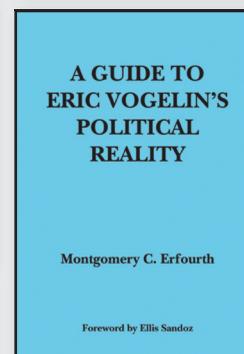
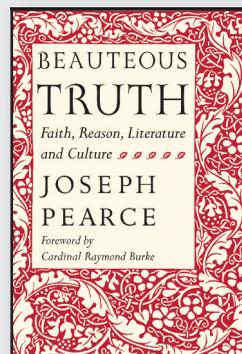
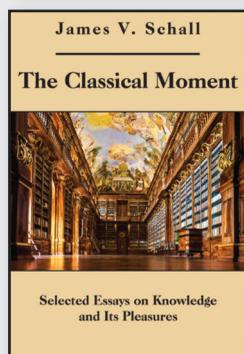
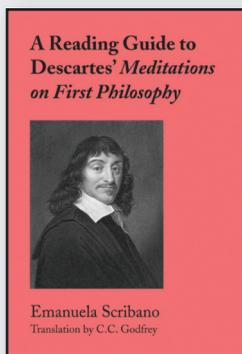
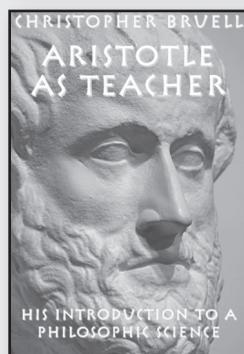
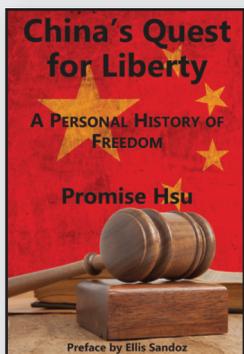
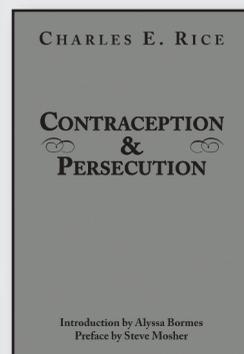
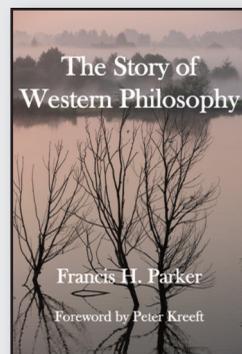
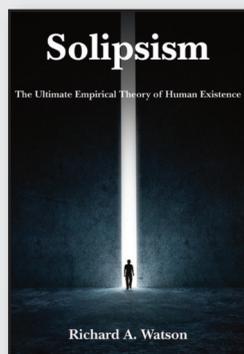
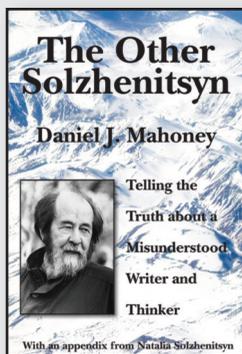
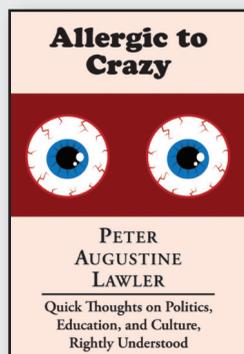
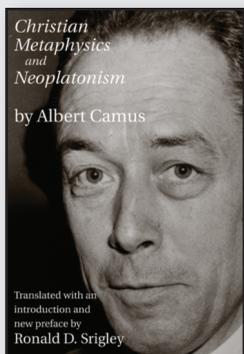
ful condemnation. He’s like a grand inquisitor who enforces the true faith of faithlessness.

The problem with insisting on cosmic indifferentism as the central organizing principle of horror literature, however, is that it’s worse than terrifying: it’s boring. If the universe is strictly material and forever callous to our pathetic human hopes, then absolutely nothing is ever at stake. Should we care whether Professor Armitage and his colleagues defeat the hideous offspring of Yog-Sothoth on Sentinel Hill? Yawn. Or if the Shining Trapezohedron in the abandoned church can summon a winged demon? Zzzzz. Or if Cthulhu rouses and ravens for delight? Wake me when the stars are wrong again. In an indifferent cosmos, we’re indifferent too. Fear is a fraud, an involuntary chemical reaction to sensory data. Life’s greatest priority is the avoidance of pain. And the oblivion of death is just another state of aimless existence.

Lovecraft succeeds as a writer because he raises the terrible possibility of cosmic indifference, not because he resolves it. Some readers may demand final answers, snuffing out mystery, but at the cost of violating Lovecraft’s dictum about the oldest, strongest, and most human kind of fear.

John J. Miller is director of the Dow Journalism Program at Hillsdale College and national correspondent for National Review.

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